

# Yoga and Sex: What is the purpose of *Vajrolīmudrā*?\*

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The first time I saw my guru was at the Kumbh Mela festival in Ujjain in 1992. A sadhu pointed at him as he walked through the camp, then turned to a woman devotee and said “Beware of that yogi: if he gets inside you he will suck out all your energy”.

When my guru was thirteen years old his guru started to teach him *vajrolīmudrā*, a technique given the highest praise in almost all texts on *haṭhayoga*, but often expunged from modern editions and translations. *Vajrolī* enables liquids—including, some say, the mixed products of sexual intercourse—to be drawn up the penis. But my guru is a lifelong celibate: why should he want to perform it? It was this apparent anomaly in my guru’s yoga practice that first piqued my interest in *vajrolī*. I’ve since come to realise that understanding *vajrolī*’s purpose is key to understanding *haṭhayoga* as a whole.

The last two years have seen no fewer than four scandals in which leading yoga gurus, two Indian, two foreign, have been accused of sexual misconduct.<sup>1</sup> The scandal in the USA involving John Friend was explained away in the *New York Times* by the yoga journalist William Broad, ever the source of a controversial soundbite, as not surprising since *haṭhayoga* “began as a sex cult”.<sup>2</sup>

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\*This is the text of a paper given at the University of Vienna’s *Yoga in Transformation* Conference on September 20th 2013.

<sup>1</sup>Only a few weeks ago the hugely popular 72-year-old Gujarati guru Asaram Bapu was arrested in Bhopal over allegations that he had sexually assaulted the 16-year-old daughter of one of his disciples while supposedly performing an exorcism on her.

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/health/nutrition/yoga-fans-sexual-flames-and-predictably-plenty-of-scandal.html?\\_r=3&pagewanted=all&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/health/nutrition/yoga-fans-sexual-flames-and-predictably-plenty-of-scandal.html?_r=3&pagewanted=all&_hpid=hp%3Ahomepage%2Fstory%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&_hpt=hp%3Ahomepage%2Fstory)

The claim that the physical techniques of *haṭhayoga* developed from the sexual practices of tantra is made not only by journalists in search of a headline; it has pervaded discourse on yoga since its arrival in the west and is often found in academic works on the subject. I hope Professor Alter doesn't mind if I quote a passage from his recent monograph *Moral Masculinity* as but one among many available examples: "there would seem to be no question but that hatha yoga developed between the ninth and fourteenth centuries as a form of practice directly linked to the subtle hydraulics and symbolic significance of ritualized sex".<sup>3</sup>

Such statements are often explained with references to *vajrolīmudrā*, unsurprisingly really, since *vajrolī* is the only haṭhayogic practice that would appear to have any direct connection with sex. I myself, in a paper published in 2005, wrote that *vajrolīmudrā*'s "unorthodox 'left-hand' tantric origins are obvious".<sup>4</sup> But my studies in the intervening years have left me not so sure. In this paper I shall draw on textual, ethnographic, experiential and anatomical data in order to present my current understanding of the purpose of *vajrolīmudrā*.

## The Mechanics of *Vajrolī*

I shall start by explaining the mechanics of the practice, my understanding of which has been helped considerably by conversations with a urologist.<sup>5</sup> I must restrict my comments to the practice of *vajrolī* by men. Several texts say that it is possible for women to practise it but they do not explain the mechanics and I have not heard of any modern female practitioners nor have I read of any in ethnographic reports.

Some scholars have suggested that it is not possible to suck liquids up through the penis.<sup>6</sup> I can assure you that it is. The method is in fact fairly simple. A tube is inserted up the urethra as far as the bladder. Yogis have traditionally used a pipe made of copper, silver or gold, which is in an elongated s-shape. The curves are necessary for the pipe to pass through the urethral sphincter. Inserting these rigid metal pipes is at first quite painful, particularly during the preliminary stages in which pipes of progressively

<sup>3</sup>ALTER 2011:130. Cf. MUÑOZ 2011:125 "probably sexual practices had always been an integral element of haṭha yoga, on account of the tantric origins of this system" and LORENZEN 2011:36 "The rejection of ritual sexual activity was never complete among the Nath yogis, however, as is evident from the vajrolī mudra, a technique of sexual control, described in the Haṭha-yoga-pradīpikā".

<sup>4</sup>MALLINSON 2005:114.

<sup>5</sup>My thanks to Tim Bates.

<sup>6</sup>E.g. WHITE 2003: 295-296, n.88, misunderstanding Darmon 2002.

increasing diameters must be used. My guru still uses them, but the other modern practitioners of *vajrolī* of whom I am aware all use rubber catheters.

In order to draw liquids up the urethra, the yogi contracts his perineum and performs *madhyamā nauli*, in which the central abdominal muscles are contracted in isolation, making the lower abdomen stand forward in a column thereby reducing the pressure in the lower intestine and bladder. The exposed end of the pipe is placed in a vessel of liquid, which, propelled by the external atmospheric pressure, rises up into the bladder.

The pipe or catheter is essential because the urethral sphincter must be open for liquids to pass through it. We have no voluntary muscular control over this sphincter and performing *nauli* would pull it tightly closed if there were no pipe or catheter to keep it open.

Corroborating this anatomical inference of the necessity of a pipe for the performance of *vajrolīmudrā* is the fact that there are no experiential or ethnographic reports of it being done without a pipe, nor do any texts explicitly say that it is possible to do so.<sup>7</sup> Two scholars who have written on *vajrolīmudrā*, Richard Darmon and Mat Rozmarynowski, both address the matter. Darmon, who did his fieldwork among tantric *sādhakas* at Tārāpīṭh in West Bengal, says that he never heard of *vajrolī* being done without a catheter.<sup>8</sup> Rozmarynowski, who himself practised *vajrolī* extensively, writes “Supposedly the urethra is enlarged by this process to the point where it is possible to do Vajroli without any tube at all; this, however, I have not yet verified.” When I asked my guru about this he told me that neither he nor his guru could do *vajrolī* without a pipe.<sup>9</sup>

Because it is impossible to perform *vajrolīmudrā* without a pipe in the urethra<sup>10</sup> the widespread understanding of *vajrolī* as a technique for absorbing mixed sexual fluids from a woman’s vagina at the end of sexual intercourse must be reconsidered.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* does prescribe practising *vajrolī* without a tube until embracing one’s partner, in order to move air through the penis: *nalikādirahitavāyusaṃcārāya āśleṣādi abhyāsaḥ kartavyaḥ* || A book on *vajrolī* published in Jodhpur in 1937 says that it is possible for advanced practitioners to do it without a pipe and prescribes three methods of learning to do so, but they too are only for the absorption of *vāyu*, air, not liquids ĀNANDSVARŪP 1937:21-26.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. ROṢU 2002:308. DAS 1992:391 says that Baul men draw up menstrual blood through the penis in sexual rituals, explaining this statement with a reference to the haṭhayogic *vajrolīmudrā*, but (*ibid.*:395) he admits that his understanding is unclear and remarks on how Bauls often mislead enquirers.

<sup>9</sup>My guru did add that there might be some Nāth Yogīs in the Gorakhpur region who can perform *vajrolī* without a pipe (personal communication 30th October 2012).

<sup>10</sup>Were the sphincter to be removed the yogi could perhaps perform *vajrolī* without a pipe but he would be incontinent.

<sup>11</sup>It is theoretically possible to insert a j-shaped pipe into a flaccid penis, then get an erection and suck up a woman’s sexual fluids from her vagina. But it would be impossible to ejaculate: the pipe would obstruct the flow of semen, resulting in it entering the bladder rather than the urethra.

## Vajrolī in Texts

With this in mind, let us turn to textual descriptions of *vajrolī*. I have identified passages which teach it in 25 texts, but shall restrict myself today to analysing those that I think are the most important for understanding its history and purpose.<sup>12</sup>

The earliest<sup>13</sup> mention of *vajrolī* (although it is not named as such) is in the circa 12th-century CE second chapter of the *Amanaska*. It is an oblique dismissal of those who “take upwards” (*ūrdhvaṃ nayanti*) *yuvatibhagapatadbindum*. The yogis are clearly taking up falling semen (*patadbindu*), but, thanks to the ambiguity inherent in the case relationships of members of Sanskrit compounds, we do not know if the semen is falling into or from the young woman’s vagina (*yuvatibhaga*). Previous analyses of this verse have understood *bhaga* here as having an implicit locative case, i.e. the semen is falling *into* the vagina, but in the light of what I said earlier, the only anatomically possible case would be the ablative, falling *from*.

The next text to mention *vajrolī*, and the first to mention it by name, is the circa 13th-century *Dattātreyayogaśāstra*, which is also the first text to teach a *haṭhayoga* named as such. In the *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* *vajrolī* is one of nine *mudrās*, physical techniques which are the defining characteristic of early *haṭhayoga*, and which, in their earliest textual teachings, are for the control of the breath and semen, and hence the mind. In the *Dattātreyayogaśāstra*, *vajrolīmudrā*’s purpose is the control of *bindu*, semen. Two substances are needed for its practice, milk and *āṅgirasa*. The latter is not defined but is said to be hard for men to get and must be procured from a woman *upāyataḥ*, “by means of some stratagem” (154). The only definition of *āṅgirasa* that I have found is in a commentary on the *Khacarīvidyā* called the *Bṛhatkhecari-prakāśa*, which postdates the *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* by about 500 years but cites it frequently. *Āṅgirasa* is glossed with *rajas*, menstrual fluid.<sup>14</sup> Women are said in the *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* to be able to achieve *siddhi*, success, by means of *vajrolī*. There are no instructions for the yogi and yoginī to have sex but it is implied.<sup>15</sup> Nowhere is either the yogi or yoginī instructed to draw up a mixture of *bindu* and *rajas*. The implication is rather that they are to conserve their own *bindu* or *rajas* and optionally draw up the other.

<sup>12</sup> All 25 passages are transcribed in full in “Textual Materials for the study of *Vajrolīmudrā*” available for download from [http://www.academia.edu/4515911/Textual\\_Materials\\_for\\_the\\_study\\_of\\_Vajrolīmudrā](http://www.academia.edu/4515911/Textual_Materials_for_the_study_of_Vajrolīmudrā).

<sup>13</sup> I omit here *Bṛhadāranyakopaniṣad* 6.4.10–11, which, in giving instructions for the resorption through the penis of sperm should conception not be wanted, is suggestive of *vajrolī*.

<sup>14</sup> “Menstrual fluid” is a somewhat inadequate translation of *rajas*; perhaps “uterine fluid” would be better.

<sup>15</sup> 155–156: “A man should strive to find a woman devoted to the practice of yoga. Either a man or a woman can obtain success if they have no regard for one another’s gender and practise with only their own ends in mind.”

The next text I want to mention is perhaps the most important for understanding the history—if not the true purpose—of *vajrolī*. It is the *Śivasamhitā*, a work on yoga composed in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, which is derivative of the Vaiṣṇava *Dattātreyayogāsāstra* but whose *haṭha-yoga* is taught within a framework of Śrīvidyā Kaula Śaivism, a relatively tame form of Kaulism some of whose practices are developments of the Love Magic of the earlier Nityā Tantras. Unlike the *Dattātreyayogāsāstra*, the *Śivasamhitā* teaches that the purpose of the *mudrās* of *haṭhayoga* is the raising of Kuṇḍalinī. In its passage on *vajrolī*, the *Śivasamhitā* praises the technique's usefulness in bringing about *bindusiddhi*, mastery of semen, but its description of its practice starts with instructions for the yogi to draw up a woman's *rajas* or menstrual fluid from her vagina through his penis (*līṅga-nālena*).<sup>16</sup> Should his semen fall during the process, he must draw that upwards too, and the mixing of the two substances within the yogi's body is the mixing of Śiva and Śakti. Unlike other early texts which teach *vajrolī*, the *Śivasamhitā* does not say that it can be practised by women. In keeping with its Love Magic heritage, however, the *Śivasamhitā* does say that the *bindu* of one who has mastered *vajrolī* will not fall even if he enjoys himself with a hundred women.

The next passage is from the fifteenth-century *Haṭhapradīpikā*, which is for the most part a compilation of extracts from earlier texts, including the three I have already cited. The *Haṭhapradīpikā*'s teachings on *vajrolī* borrow from the *Dattātreyayogāsāstra*.<sup>17</sup> There is extensive praise of the preservation of semen and, at 3.86, the yogi is told to draw up *nārībhage patadbindum*. Here *°bhage* is the final member of a compound and so has a case ending, which is locative: the semen to be drawn up is falling into the vagina, in the manner of the *vajrolīmudrā* taught in the *Śivasamhitā*.<sup>18</sup> Women are *yoginīs*, says the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, if they use *vajrolī* to draw up both semen and menstrual fluid.

Later texts, though more extensive in their treatment of the practical details of *vajrolī*, add little to our understanding of its purpose, with most teaching both the preservation of semen and, to a lesser extent, the absorp-

<sup>16</sup>One could take *līṅganālena* to mean "through a pipe in the penis" but that would be a rather forced interpretation, particularly as there is no mention anywhere in the text of inserting a *nāla* into the *līṅga* (and M-W says that *nāla* (s.v.) means urethra in the *Suśrutasamhitā*). The absence of a pipe in the ŚS's teachings suggests that the author is unacquainted with the practical details of *vajrolī*.

<sup>17</sup>*Haṭhapradīpikā* 3.82a-83b = *Dattātreyayogāsāstra* 152a-153b (3.82b = *Śivasamhitā* 4.79ab); *Haṭhapradīpikā* 3.86c-87d = *Dattātreyayogāsāstra* 156c-157d (3.87cd = *Śivasamhitā* 4.88ab).

<sup>18</sup>Later in the passage is a verse (3.96) not found in all witnesses of the text and said in Brahmānanda's 19th-century commentary to be an interpolation, in which the yogi is instructed to draw up through his penis a woman's *rajas* or menstrual fluid.

tion of mixed semen and menstrual fluid. Some give practical details on, for example, the nature of the pipe, but often it appears that the authors of the texts do not fully understand the technique. A curious omission from *all* textual teachings on the mechanics of *vajrolī* is *navli*, without which it is impossible to draw liquids into the body. The terse instructions of earlier texts like the *Dattātreyayogāsāstra* clearly need to be elucidated by an expert guru, but some later works such as the *Brhatkhecarīprakāśa* or *Haṭhābhyāsa-paddhati* go into great detail about all the stages of the practice and say that to draw up liquids the yogi should clench the region of the anus or manipulate the *apāna* breath. That they make no mention of *navli* suggests that their authors did not fully understand how *vajrolī* is to be carried out.

I don't have time to go through the finer details of the practice today and from these later texts shall mention only a handful of passages which have some bearing on my topic. The first is from the 17th-century *Haṭharatnāvalī* of Śrīnivāsa. By the time of the composition of the *Haṭharatnāvalī*, the awakening of Kuṇḍalinī, absent in early *haṭha* works such as the *Amṛta-siddhi* and *Dattātreyayogāsāstra*, had become a key aim of the practices of *haṭhayoga*, and the *Haṭharatnāvalī* is the first text to state explicitly that *vajrolīmudrā* awakens Kuṇḍalinī (2.82). It is not, however, for the absorption of the mixed products of sex (at least not by a man). The *Haṭharatnāvalī* gives instructions for a man to have sexual intercourse with a woman, but tells him only to draw up *bindu*, not *rajas*. This is followed by instructions for a woman to have sex with a man and to draw up both *bindu* and *rajas*.

In the instructions for a man Śrīnivāsa includes *Haṭhapradīpikā* 3.86, but there is an important variant in the *Haṭharatnāvalī*'s version of the verse (2.96). Instead of the *Haṭhapradīpikā*'s locative °*bhage*, “into the vagina”, we have the ablative °*bhagāt*:<sup>19</sup> the semen to be drawn up is falling “from the vagina”. Here, it seems to me, might be the explanation of how *vajrolīmudrā* is to be performed as part of sexual intercourse (by a man, at least): the fluid or fluids to be drawn up are collected in a pot—in the manner of older tantric rituals involving the offering of sexual fluids to deities—and the yogi can absorb them through a pipe. In support of my preference for the *Haṭharatnāvalī*'s reading, Śrīnivāsa elsewhere provides accurate practical details about yogic techniques not found in other texts, and he sometimes explicitly contradicts the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, voicing clear disapproval of the lack of practical knowledge of Svātmārāma, its author.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> °*bhagāt* is not to be found in any of the *Haṭhapradīpikā* manuscripts collated for the Lonavla edition.

<sup>20</sup>E.g. *Haṭharatnāvalī* 2.86-87 (in the passage on *vajrolī*): *haṭhapradīpikākāramataṃ haṭhayogābhyāse 'jñānavilasitam ity upekṣaṇīyam* “the teachings of the author of the *Haṭhapradīpikā* as regards the practice of *haṭhayoga* display his ignorance and should be disregarded”; cf. *HR* 1.27.

A passage in the c. 1800 *Vajroliyoga* supports the notion that, whatever its purpose, *vajrolī* must be performed with a pipe. It identifies *amarolī*, a variant of *vajrolī* whose many different textual definitions I don't have time to discuss today, as the combination of the sun and the moon, i.e. *bindu* and *rajas*, that happens should the yogi happen to let his *bindu* fall, and that it should be sucked up *nālena*, “with a pipe”.

So, to summarise what textual teachings have to say about the purpose of *vajrolīmudrā*: the greatest emphasis by far is put on its use in *bindudhāraṇa*, the preservation of semen, or, when women are said to be able to perform *vajrolī*, *rajo dhāraṇa*, preservation of menstrual fluid. There are mentions of the mixing of semen and menstrual fluid and their absorption during sexual intercourse in texts that postdate *vajrolī*'s earliest descriptions, but they are fewer and given less prominence than the teachings on *bindudhāraṇa*. Some texts teach that the male yogi should suck up a woman's *rajas*, but not during sexual intercourse. No text which gives practical details on how to perform the technique says that it can be done without a pipe.

### ***Vajrolī*'s true purpose: the retention of semen**

Almost all the texts that teach *vajrolī* open their teachings with the declaration that it enables the yogi to succeed in yoga while flouting the *niyamas* or regulations elsewhere said to be essential prerequisites for its practice. The regulation implied is that of *brahmacaryā*, sexual continence. As I mentioned earlier, one of the main aims of the *mudrās* that were the defining feature of *hathayoga* as taught in its early texts is the preservation of semen. This would of course preclude ejaculatory sexual intercourse and many texts of *hathayoga* go as far as telling the aspiring male yogi to avoid the company of women altogether.<sup>21</sup>

But mastery of *vajrolīmudrā* will enable the yogi to indulge in ejaculatory sex, to have his cake and eat it, as it were, by resorbing his *bindu* if needs be. Now, there are lots of practices associated with *hathayoga* which are bizarre or even distasteful, but I find it particularly hard to imagine someone actually resorbing their semen in the only way that it could possibly be done. Perhaps there were some yogis who after failing to control themselves got out their copper pipes and remedied the situation, but I believe that *vajrolī*'s true purpose is otherwise and is in accordance with a hypothesis put forward by the andrologue, or specialist in male sexual health, Richard

<sup>21</sup>E.g. *Amṛtasiddhi* 19.7; *Dattātreyayogasāstra* 70, 86; *Amarāghaprabodha* 44; *Haṭhapradīpikā* 1.61-62, *Śivasamhitā* 3.37, *Gheraṇḍasaṃhitā* 5.26. Cf. *Gorakhbhāṇī pad* 68.

Darmon, in his article on *vajrolī*.<sup>22</sup> He suggests that passing a pipe through the urethra sensitises an erogenous region near the mouth of the bladder called the verumontanum, which is key to ejaculation. Through repeated practice the yogi develops a memory for the sensation and thus control of the ejaculatory impulse.

This concurs with what the two *vajrolī* practitioners I have met in India say about its purpose. My guru, after describing the therapeutic benefits of rinsing out the bladder, says that *vajrolī* gives him control of his *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra*, which prevents him from ever shedding his semen. Thanks to his mastery of *vajrolī*, he says, he has never even had *svapn doṣ*, a wet dream. Similarly, a yogi I met in 2006 at Gangotri told me that mastery of *vajrolī* is essential when raising Kuṇḍalinī, otherwise she will bring about involuntary ejaculation as she passes through the *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra*.<sup>23</sup>

And, as we have seen, rather than the ability to resorb semen, it is this ability to prevent it from falling in the first place with which *vajrolī* is most commonly associated in our textual sources. I know of only one mention of *vajrolī* in texts other than manuals of yoga and their commentaries, in Vidyāranya's *Śaṅkaradigvijaya*. The passage says that desires cannot overcome one who is unattached, just as, thanks to *vajrolī*, Kṛṣṇa, the lover of 16,000 Gopīs, does not lose his seed.<sup>24</sup>

It is this ability that accounts for the connection between *vajrolī* and *rājayoga*, which, in the light of the modern understanding of *rājayoga* as meditation, might be surprising to some. In the 17th-century Braj Bhasha *Sarvāṅgayogapradīpikā* of the Dādūpanthī Sundardās, *rājayoga* is the ability to sport like Śiva with Pārvaṭī and not be overcome by Kāma (desire/the god of love). *Vajrolī* is not named in the passage but the yogi is to raise his semen having pierced the *nāḍī cakra* and the final verse says "Rare are those who know the secrets of *rājayoga*; he who does not should shun the company of women". In another Braj Bhasha text, the *Jogpradīpakā*, which was written in 1737, *vajrolīmudrā*, taught under the name of *vīrya mudrā*, i.e. the semen *mudrā*, is said to bring about *rājayoga*, which is the ability to enjoy oneself with women without losing one's seed. A Braj Bhasha work

<sup>22</sup> DARMON 2002:232; cf. ROṢU 2002:309.

<sup>23</sup> See also DAS 1992:391, n.23 on a *vajrolī*-type practice used by Bengali Bauls as part of coitus reservatus.

<sup>24</sup> Similar statements are of course found in *haṭhayoga* texts: as we have heard, *Śivasamhitā* 4.103 says that he who knows *vajrolī* will not shed his semen even after enjoying one hundred women and the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* says that once the practice of *vajrolī* is well established, the yogi can have sex with sixteen women a day (but it adds that his continence, his *brahmacaryā*, is firm and that he is dispassionate towards women). The *Haṭhapradīpikā* makes a similar claim about *khecārimudrā*. By sealing it in his head with his tongue, the yogi's *bindu* will not fall even if he is embraced by an amorous woman (3.41). This verse is also found in the *Dhyānabindūpaniṣad* (83c-84b); commenting on it, Upaniṣadbrahmayogin says that *khecārimudrā* bestows *vajrolisiddhi*.



which probably dates to a similar period, the *Jog Mañjarī*, equates *vajrolī* with *rāja yoga* and says that the yogi who does not know it must not make love, adding that Śiva used it when sporting with Umā (71-72). Nor is this a late or localised development. The *Dattātreyayogasāstra* follows its teachings on *vajrolī* by saying that it is the only way to bring about *rājayoga* (160), and the *Haṭharatnāvalī* (2.104) says that one becomes a *rājayogī* through control of semen.<sup>25</sup> The implication of the name *rājayoga* here is that one can live like a king, indulging oneself in sensory pleasures, yet still be a yogi, i.e. one need not renounce the world and become an ascetic.<sup>26</sup>

Here lies the key to understanding *vajrolīmudrā* and to understanding *haṭhayoga* as a whole. As I have argued elsewhere, the physical practices of *haṭhayoga* developed within ascetic milieux, with records of some going back as far as the time of the Buddha.<sup>27</sup> The composition of the texts that make up the early *haṭha* corpus during the course of the 11th to 15th centuries brought their techniques, which had never previously been codified, to a householder audience.

There are no references to *vajrolī* in texts prior to the second millennium CE,<sup>28</sup> but there are descriptions of a technique which, it seems to me, is part of the same yogic paradigm as *vajrolī*. This is the *asidhārāvrata* or, as translated by Shaman Hatley in a forthcoming article on the subject, “the knife’s edge observance”. This practice, which involves a man either lying next to or having intercourse with a woman but not ejaculating, is attested from the early part of the first millennium, before the likely date of composition of the earliest tantric texts, and its practitioners probably included Śaiva brahmin ascetics.<sup>29</sup> The *asidhārāvrata* is then taught in early tantric works, including the oldest known tantra, the *Niśvāsātattvasaṃhitā*, and is the first tantric ritual to involve sexual contact.<sup>30</sup> *Vajrolī* and the *asidhārāvrata* are never taught together, but both involve sexual continence and *vajrolī* would nicely complement the *asidhārāvrata*, both as a method of mastering it and of making amends if the ascetic were to fall off the knife’s

<sup>25</sup> See also the definition of *rājayoga* in the 19th-century Gujarati *Āgamaprakāśa* as the yoga of the Kaulas and the *Yogaśikhopaniṣad*’s definition of *rājayoga* as the union of *rajas* and *retas*, as noted by BÜHNEMANN (2007:15-16). Cf. Hamsamiṭṭhu’s designation of *rājayoga* as a śākta form of the *nāsalilā* which involves sexual rites (VĀSUDEVA 2011: 132).

<sup>26</sup> The *Rājayogabhāṣya* (*Maṇḍalabrāhmanopaniṣad* with a commentary (*Rājayogabhāṣya*), ed. Mahādeva Śāstrī, Government Oriental Library Series, Mysore, The Government Branch Press, 1896) says that *rājayoga* is yoga fit for a king (p.1: *rājayogaḥ rājña upayukto yogas tathocyate*) and Divākara, commenting on the *Bodhasāra*, says that *rājayoga* is so called because kings can accomplish it even while remaining in their position (section 14, verse 1, *rājayogo rājñāṃ nṛpāṇāṃ svasthāne sthitvāpi sādhyatūṃ śakyatvāt*); see also BIRCH 2013: 70 n.269.

<sup>27</sup> MALLINSON forthcoming.

<sup>28</sup> See note 13.

<sup>29</sup> HATLEY forthcoming: 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*: 4.

edge.

There are parallels too in the histories of *vajrolī* and the *asidhārāvrata*. Over the course of the first millennium the *asidhārāvrata* transformed from an ascetic observance for the cultivation of sensory restraint into a tantric method of attaining magical powers.<sup>31</sup> Likewise *vajrolī*, which in its earliest textual descriptions is an ascetic technique to prevent the loss of semen, is transformed into a means of absorbing the combined products of sexual intercourse, the *guhyaṃṛta* or secret nectar of earlier tantric rites, and also of enabling the yogi to enjoy as much sex as he wants.

### *Vajrolī* and Tantra

Like many of the central practices of *haṭhayoga*, *vajrolī* is not taught in tantric texts which predate the composition of the *haṭha* corpus. Nor is it found in the early works of the *haṭha* corpus connected with the tantric Siddha or Nāth traditions, namely the *Amṛtasiddhi*, *Vivekamārtanda*, *Gora-kṣasataka* and *Jñāneśvarī*,<sup>32</sup> works which, significantly, do not call their yoga *haṭha*.<sup>33</sup> The *haṭha* corpus is evidence of not only the popularisation of ancient and difficult ascetic practices (their difficulty accounting for the name *haṭha*) but also their appropriation by tantric traditions. It is this process of appropriation that brought about the superimposition of Kuṇḍalinī yoga onto the ancient *haṭha* techniques, together with the refashioning of *vajrolīmudrā*. It is seen most clearly in the *Śivasamhitā*, the first text to teach that the *haṭhayogic mudrās* are for the raising of Kuṇḍalinī rather than the control of breath and *bindu*, and the first text to teach that *vajrolī* is for the absorption of the combined products of sexual intercourse.

One reason for the usual assumption of continuity between tantra and *haṭhayoga* (and the primacy of the former) is their shared terminology.<sup>34</sup> What we actually see in the *haṭha* corpus is a reworking of tantric terminology. Words such as *mudrā*, *vedha*, *bindu* and of course *āsana* have quite different meanings in the *haṭha* corpus from those which they have in earlier Śaiva works. This, I would argue, is because Śaivism, in becoming India's dominant religion in the period from 600-1300 CE, also became India's

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: loc. cit.

<sup>32</sup> KIEHNLE 2000:270 n.31: "Exercises like *vajrolī* that allow for keeping [*bindu* in the head], or taking it back, during sexual intercourse do not occur in the material handed down within the Jñānadeva tradition".

<sup>33</sup> The *Amaraughaprabodha*, perhaps the first text of the Gorakṣa tradition to teach a *haṭhayoga* named as such, dismisses the physical practice of *vajrolīmudrā* (vv. 8-9)

<sup>34</sup> Another reason for the assumption of continuity and a progression from tantra to *haṭhayoga* is the chronology of their textual corpora. Some of the practices that the *haṭhayoga* corpus encodes, however, predate the texts and practices of Śaivism (MALLINSON forthcoming).

dominant religious idiom. It is a fruitless task to search Śaiva texts for *haṭha* techniques under the names they are given in *haṭha* texts. Śaiva *mudrās*, for example, are physical attitudes, most commonly hand gestures, which are used for propitiating tantric deities. The *mudrās* taught in early *haṭha* texts, in contrast, are methods of controlling the breath or semen. And semen is called *bindu* in *haṭha* texts but in those of Śaivism *bindu* is, usually, a point on which to focus meditation.

*Vajrolī*'s use in *haṭha* texts may also be a new application of an older tantric term. Its etymology is unclear but a derivation from *vajrāvalī* seems most likely.<sup>35</sup> I have found no instances of the word *vajrolī* in Śaiva works but Péter-Dániel Szántó has provided me with a transcript of a Buddhist tantric work called the *Avalokiteśvaravajrolī* from a circa 14th-century manuscript. The practices taught are very obscure but are clearly nothing to do with the haṭhayogic *vajrolīmudrā*, supporting the hypothesis that the name of the haṭhayogic *vajrolī*, like the names of other haṭhayogic practices and principles, was appropriated from a tantric practice of a completely different nature.

Certain aspects of *vajrolīmudrā* facilitated its appropriation and refashioning by tantric traditions. Many tantric texts speak of the union of male and female principles within the body of the yogi, most famously in Kaula works in which the goddess Kuṇḍalinī rises from the base of the spine to union with Śiva in the head. Some, in particular Buddhist tantric works, also teach visualisations of the union of the products of sex and their rise up the body's central column. Despite assertions in secondary literature,<sup>36</sup> however, none of these Buddhist visualisations is accompanied by *vajrolī*-like physical techniques, nor are speculations that it was practised in first-millennium China corroborated by what is found in Chinese texts of that period.<sup>37</sup> In an internalisation of earlier tantric rites involving sexual fluids,

<sup>35</sup>Cf. the Marathi *Līlācaritra*, *uttarārdh* 475, which talks of how the Nāths cheat death (*kāḷavaṃcanā*) and names their four *oḥis*: *vajrolī* | *amarolī āti* | *siddholī* | *divyolī* | *iyā cyāhī oḥī nāthāṃciyā* (of which only the first two are said to remain in this *kali yuga*); see also FELDHAUS 1980:104 n.11. The *Bṛhatkhecariṇīprakāśa* (f. 103r) gives a *nirukti* of *vajrolī* (and *amarolī* and *sahajolī*) that emphasises its efficacy at preventing the loss of semen: *vajram iva u visma*[ye] *na na liyate* [kṣarati vīryam a] *nayeti* | *amara iva u na liyate* 'naya *sahajā iva u na liyate* 'nayeti *ca* [ta] *tannirukteḥ*.

<sup>36</sup>E.g. WHITE 1996:63, 201–202.

<sup>37</sup>Pace assertions by WHITE (*ibid.*: loc. cit.) *et al.*, there is no evidence of *vajrolī* being part of Daoist or Buddhist sexual yoga in pre-modern Tibet, China or Japan. White cites Needham in the context of China, but the only physical practice for the retention or resorption of semen in the early Chinese texts discussed by NEEDHAM (1974:198) very clearly involves pressing on the perineum and nothing more. UMEKAWA (2004) does not mention *vajrolī* in his analysis of Daoist and Buddhist sexual techniques in China and Japan in the early part of the second millennium. And I have found no references to *vajrolī* being practised in Tibet until the modern period (e.g. DAVID-NEEL (1931:141) who reports how Tsang Yang Gyatso, the sixth Dalai Lama, in said to have publicly resorbed his urine in response to accusations of sexual incontinence).

two early *haṭha* texts of the Siddha tradition, the *Amṛtasiddhi* and *Viveka-mārtaṇḍa*, teach that both *rajas*, menstrual fluid, and *bindu*, semen, exist within the body of the male yogi and that their union is the purpose of yoga.<sup>38</sup> When the *haṭha* technique of *vajrolīmudrā* was adopted by these tantric lineages, the idea—if not the actual practice—of uniting the external products of sex within the yogi’s body would have been a natural development from these earlier teachings, which are then used in later commentaries to explain *vajrolī*,<sup>39</sup> despite its practice being alien to the milieu in which those texts were originally composed.

The absence of quintessential haṭhayogic techniques such as *vajrolī* and *khecarīmudrā* from the tantric corpus is symptomatic of the absence also of teachings on the preservation of semen. As Professor WHITE has shown, the main purpose of sexual rites in the Śaiva corpus is the emission of fluids to be used as offerings to deities.<sup>40</sup> Some texts, particularly Buddhist tantric works, do teach that sexual bliss is to be prolonged, but orgasm is still required to produce the substances necessary in ritual. The only tantric sexual rite not to end in orgasm is the *asidhārāvrata* mentioned earlier. The *asidhārāvrata* finds its last textual teaching in the 7th- to 8th-century *Picumata* or *Brahmayāmala*. By the 11th century it has been sidelined by orgasmic sexual practices; Abhinavagupta “apparently viewed it as a form of penance (*tapas*) not specifically tantric in character”.<sup>41</sup>

The haṭhayogic *vajrolīmudrā* has its origins in the same non-tantric celibate ascetic milieu as the *asidhārāvrata*. The yogi traditions associated with the early *haṭha* texts were all celibate, even those that had developed out of Kaula lineages which had practised ritual sex.<sup>42</sup> The purpose of the composition of the *haṭha* texts was to bring the yogic techniques of these ascetic traditions to a non-celibate householder audience. *Vajrolīmudrā*, which was originally a method for ascetics to ensure their celibacy, was taught as a method for householders to remain sexually active while not losing the benefits of their yoga practice. But in reality it is hard to imagine normal householders learning *vajrolī*. I suspect that it was, as it still is, a technique practised by a very small number of yogis which their householder disciples know of and might aspire to, but will never actually practise, in much the same way that a student of modern yoga might admire the advanced postures of a skilled

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Gorakh *pad* 12.5, *śabdi* 141b.

<sup>39</sup> *Haṭhapradīpikājyotsnā* ad 4.100.

<sup>40</sup> WHITE 2003. See also SANDERSON 1988:680; SANDERSON 2005: 113 n.63; *Brahmayāmala* chh. 22, 24, 25 on the *guhyaṃṛta*, “the secret nectar of immortality”, which is the combined sexual fluids and is “among the most important substances utilized in ritual” (HATLEY forthcoming: 6).

<sup>41</sup> HATLEY forthcoming: 7.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. *Gorakṣasataka* 101 (MALLINSON 2011).

yoga teacher.<sup>43</sup>

As I stated at the beginning of this talk, many scholars have pointed to *vajrolī* as evidence that *haṭhayoga* developed from tantric practices of ritual sex. But DARMON has reported that the *vajrolī*-practising *tāntrikas* of Tarapith do not use it as part of their sexual rites (or at least they don't go through the mechanics of its practice—they may of course reap its benefits). And when *vajrolī* is taught in texts as a means to sexual gratification it is not associated with ritual sex but with the more mundane variety. Just as the partner in the *asidhārāvrata* need not be a tantric initiate, the consort of the *vajrolī*-practitioner is variously said to be the yogi's wife, a 16-year old girl or a woman who is under one's control.<sup>44</sup> In all the textual teachings on *vajrolī* that I have found, there is just one phrase which praises sex itself: the *Yuktabhavadeva* (7.239) says that *vajrolī* was taught by Gorakṣanātha for those householders who practise yoga but are devoted to the pleasure of sex because through it they obtain *brahmānanda*, the bliss of *brahman*.

The distinction between the celibate ascetic milieu in which *vajrolī* originated and the tantric traditions which appropriated it should not, however, be seen as simply between puritanical ascetics and licentious libertines. Why, for example, should the *Dattātreya yogaśāstra*, a text that explicitly denigrates the tantric *sādhaka* and teaches a *haṭhayoga* full of practices for the preservation of semen, tell the aspiring *vajrolī*-practitioner that he needs to get hold of some menstrual fluid? And Dattātreya may be the tutelary deity of an ancient lineage of celibate ascetics which flourishes to this day, but he is also the archetypal *avadhūta* yogi who can do what he wants. In the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa* he hides in a lake in order to avoid some young men seeking his tuition. When they don't go away even after a hundred years of the gods, he decides to put them off by openly drinking and making love with a beautiful woman, which, says the text, is all right, because as a master of yoga he is not at fault.<sup>45</sup> Kapila, meanwhile, is an ancient sage long associated with asceticism, celibacy and yoga. In the *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* he is said to be the first to have taught the haṭhayogic *mudrās* and in the *Haṭhatattva-kaumudī* he is specifically said to have been the first to teach *vajrolī*. But he is also associated with unorthodox practices and antinomian behaviour. The 11th-century or earlier *Brhatkathāślokaśaṃgraha* says of Caṇḍasiṃha's

<sup>43</sup> Some of the teachings on *vajrolī* found in texts are enough to put off all but the most dedicated student. The *Haṭhābhyaśapaddhati* says how during *vajrolī*'s preliminary practice the yogi experiences such pain that he fears an imminent death. His skin erupts in boils, he becomes extremely thin and his attendants must do their utmost to keep him alive.

<sup>44</sup> *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* 155 mentions a *yogābhyaśaratā strī*, a woman well versed in yoga practice, as the source of *āṅgirasa*, i.e. menstrual fluid, but does not prescribe sexual intercourse.

<sup>45</sup> *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa adhyāya* 17.

city: “There the vices that usually terrify those who want to be liberated from the wheel of rebirth are prescribed by Kapila and others in treatises on liberation” (20.153).

## Conclusion

I shall conclude with a summary of my understanding of *vajrolī*’s history and purpose. The physical practices which distinguish *haṭhayoga* from other forms of yoga and which are the traditional yoga practices most closely related to those of modern yoga, developed within ancient non-tantric ascetic traditions for whom celibacy, or at least continence, was paramount. From the end of the first millennium, these practices were taught to householders and appropriated by tantric traditions. In that process *vajrolīmudrā* was refashioned from a technique aimed at ensuring an ascetic’s continence into one that allows a householder to enjoy the pleasures of sex while remaining a yogi. A further development saw later traditions project *vajrolī* onto two tantric concepts: firstly, an early notion of the combined products of sex as being the ultimate offering in ritual; and, secondly, a later notion—an interiorisation of the first—of the male and female principles as being located within the body of the individual yogi. As a result these tantric traditions made the fanciful but catchy claim that *vajrolī* enables the yogi to absorb the combined products of sex during sexual intercourse. This understanding of *vajrolī* has, despite its anatomical impossibility, become widespread. Ethnographic and textual study, however, show that *vajrolī* is one of a set of yogic techniques in which the act of sex plays no part, but is permitted as an indulgence once they have been mastered.

It is the mistaken identification of *haṭhayoga* and tantra (and of course tantra’s misidentification with sex) that is responsible for the notion that yoga originated as a “sex cult”. And of course the recent scandals involving prominent yoga gurus have nothing to do with yoga; they are abuses of positions of power.

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